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ABSTRACT

Four successful content area writing aids have been developed in the writing center at a southeastern community college. The first is a content area writing lab, tailored to a sociology course, in which students receive concentrated instruction on notetaking, studying for and taking essay exams, and writing a questionnaire and an analysis paper. The second is an assignment guide for research papers, including guidelines for the format of a research paper and a list of suggested topics. Writing center personnel also work in the classrooms on research paper assignments during various stages of students' drafts. The third content area writing aid is a worksheet designed for students in a mental health course to use when preparing a review of an article. For each of the review parts--summary, personal response, and relation to theoretical concepts learned in class--the worksheet lists several questions to consider before writing the actual paper. A similar procedure is used for an extended book review. The fourth content area writing aid is a booklet on the topic of writing letters to the editor and to public officials. Students read the booklet in the center, then compose letters that are subsequently mailed. Such letters have been published in newspapers and have received responses from public officials. These four tools were developed at the request of content area teachers, who now know that the writing center can be of help to them as well as to the students. (HTH)

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THE WRITING CENTER AS A CONSULTING SERVICE FOR CONTENT AREA FACULTY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

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To call our Writing Center the focal point of a Writing Across the Curriculum program is something of a misnomer. And yet, as its name implies, our Writing Center has truly become the center for concerns about writing, both to students and to faculty members in many disciplines. Our college has not formed a grand scheme, complete with faculty committees and standardized grading scales and writing requirements in all courses. And yet, the Writing Center has had a definite impact on the way students and faculty view college writing. As I look back on the center's five years of history, I can immediately see four successful practices that have evolved from conversations, brainstorming sessions, and other center/faculty cooperation: content area writing labs, assignment guides, worksheets, and writing booklets. In the paragraphs to follow, I will explain each of these practices more precisely and show how each resulted in a new approach to writing than had been used previously by the content area instructor.

Content area writing labs

The center has helped to develop several content area writing labs, but one of the most successful, in my opinion, was initiated in the first year of the center's existence. A sociology instructor was concerned because many of her students were experiencing difficulty with several skills she considered basic, such as taking notes, composing essay tests, and writing a simple questionnaire and analysis. She came to the center to ask whether we had learning packets or other materials that her students could use. On further examination of the nature and extent of the problems, she and I decided not to use general materials already available,

but to develop a series of labs especially tailored for her course. Students were encouraged to participate in the voluntary afternoon labs, and as an incentive, she offered a few points of extra credit to those who attended. In preparation for the note-taking session, we developed a list of note-taking strategies. Second, she taped an entire class lecture and listened to it, taking the type of notes she expected from the students. Students were then to come to the lab session with the notes they had taken from the same lecture. She and I went through each student's notes, pointing out strengths and weaknesses. Finally, she passed out copies of her notes and students compared their own notes to hers. She asked students to come to her on an individual basis during the next week or so to show her their notes and see whether they had improved as a result of the lab session. She was very pleased with the results exhibited by many of the students during this follow-up period.

For the essay test session, we followed a similar procedure, with students receiving tips for studying and taking essay tests, then trying out the strategies on an essay question directly related to the information they had been studying from their text and classroom lectures. For the questionnaire and analysis paper, I developed with the students a sample questionnaire for a subject similar to the one assigned in class and led a discussion about how they would modify the questions for their own surveys. Second, we developed a fill-in-the-blanks model for a survey analysis, which we discussed with the students so that they would have a better mental picture of what was being required of them. The survey analysis was a writing genre totally unfamiliar to most of the students, so that we felt such a step-by-step approach was appropriate. In

follow-up sessions, scheduled while students were working on their subsequent tests and papers, it was clear in most cases that the students' work reflected a better feel for both form and content.

Assignment guides

The thought had never occurred to us on the Writing Center staff (being English teachers) that beginning students in many content area classes are put into the position of having to write a research paper without a written set of instructions. In the first week of operation, however, we quickly learned that a large proportion of content area research paper assignments come in the form of a hasty phrase scrawled on the blackboard or a few sentences spoken in the final minutes of a class session. It is true that some students have the sophistication to cope with such fleeting instructions and do produce a passable piece of research. Unfortunately, we have found that all too often, two students exposed to the same assignment can copy down two rather different interpretations of what is expected of them. Moreover, over the course of the term, the instructor may repeat the assignment on several occasions, altering it unintentionally each time, perhaps because he is still refining it in his own mind. Such a situation can lead to confusion and frustration on the student's part and an unfair grading standard on the teacher's part, for the student who most successfully guesses the teacher's intentions is generally the one to come up with the "A."

Having been frustrated with such situations again and again but lacking the perfect moment to confront faculty members directly about the problem, we were quite delighted when a faculty member from community and social services actually came to us and asked if we had any ideas about how to provide a little instruction in the research process within

a content class. I met several times with him to discuss the objectives of the course, the purposes of the research assignment, and the criteria by which the paper would be judged. He and I then prepared a list of guidelines for the format of the paper. Second, we prepared a list of suggested topics, including a formal outline for several sample topics. The third step was to arrange a series of classroom presentations during the quarter. In the first session, the classroom teacher and I worked as a team to discuss the handout and to get students involved in thinking about possible topics. A few weeks later, I visited the classroom for a brief fifteen-minute session on narrowing a topic, and ended with an invitation to students to visit the Writing Center if they had questions or problems in organizing their papers. Toward the end of the quarter, I again attended the class, this time for a brief workshop with students' rough drafts. Both the classroom teacher and I circulated, giving pointers to each student about any modifications needed in his draft and answering specific questions about documentation. During the quarter, nearly all the students visited the Writing Center at least once and several attended more often. Best of all, the classroom teacher was able to see a real difference in the papers from those of previous quarters. This instructor has worked with us every year since that time, developing similar assignment guides and classroom visits for each of the courses he teaches. He has also proved to be one of the best public relations sources the Writing Center has ever had.

Worksheets

Another project involved an instructor who has been using writing in her classes for a number of years. She was planning to assign a book review for her mental health classes and came to the Writing Center for

some suggestions about how to approach the somewhat sophisticated writing genre with her students. We decided a logical approach was to have the students read a certain article on a subject of mental health and then spend a class session discussing how to analyze the article and write a review about it. The next step was to design and distribute a worksheet for students to use when preparing their article review. The worksheet asked general questions that would lead students to analyze the article according to their own background and then to set up the required components for a review. In this class, the review was to be divided into three parts: (1) summary, (2) personal response, and (3) relation to theoretical concepts learned in class; for each of these parts, the worksheet listed several questions to consider before writing the actual paper. Once the article reviews were completed, we went over them with the students and offered suggestions for improvement. Then the same procedure was followed for the larger paper. In the classroom teacher's estimation, the students did seem to learn from doing the article review what was expected in the longer book review. And from the perspective of the Writing Center, the students benefited noticeably from having the worksheet as a guide for organizing their thoughts before beginning to write.

Writing booklets

A fourth technique was the preparation of a booklet on the topic of writing letters to the editor and to public officials. It evolved from a series of conversations between a government instructor and the Writing Center staff about how to instruct students in the art of letter writing without taking up an excessive amount of class time. Together, we gathered and composed information for the booklet on what to include and

what not to include in such a letter. We also gathered examples for the booklet from the local newspapers and from the Washington Post to illustrate the variety of styles and subject matters represented by actual published letters. In addition, we included a letter in standard business letter format and a list of addresses of key city and state officials. The project began with a short classroom presentation by the instructor and me; together, we explained the requirements, displayed the booklet, and outlined the procedures for the students to follow. Students were to visit the Writing Center to read through the booklet and then discuss their letters with the Writing Center staff. The fact that the booklets were housed in the center encouraged all students to pay a visit. Once they realized the staff was friendly and helpful, many came back several times. Finally, the true test came: the letters were mailed to the newspapers and to public officials. Within a few weeks, at least a half dozen had been published in Richmond papers, and students were beginning to receive responses from their Senators and Congressmen; one actually heard from President Reagan. The next quarter, we included in the booklet some of the actual successful student letters from the previous quarter. Knowing that their letters had a real chance of being published turned out to be a strong motivation for writing organized and grammatically correct letters. Many students began to show special care in their writing that I had not often witnessed in my four years in the center.

Conclusion

These four examples are not intended to be judged for their originality; I am certain many of you have tried or at least heard of these techniques in your experience as English teachers. What the examples do show, I hope, is how a Writing Center can serve as a consultation service for instructors in

other disciplines where writing is too often ignored and virtually never taught. We feel that projects such as those described here are valuable because they have formed a foundation for improved instruction and a stronger concern for writing at our college. Students have known from the beginning that the Writing Center is for all disciplines; now faculty members are beginning to see that we can help them too.